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ABSTRACT

Having students compile annotated bibliographies can promote collaborative learning. For example, when a class on writing across the curriculum was asked to survey the writing emphasis of courses in various departments at the University of Arizona, cooperation and collaboration were integral to the overall project. Students had individual responsibilities but were aware of what the others were doing, so that articles in a discipline other than their assigned one were passed on to the appropriate investigators during the next class session. Learning the mechanics of writing annotations was fairly simple. In producing an annotated bibliography, the students found that reading and writing became so interrelated as to be indistinguishable. The activity can engage students because they are learning as they produce something useful that has value to the community outside the classroom. The success of student participation in creating an annotated bibliography relies on putting it to use. (SRT)

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More Than an Exercise: Annotated Bibliography as Collaborative Learning

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More Than an Exercise: Annotated Bibliography
as Collaborative Learning

Kenneth Bruffee opens his article "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" with the statement "There are some signs these days that collaborative learning is of increasing interest to English teachers" (635). An understatement, perhaps. Collaborative learning has become the buzz phrase of the moment for English teachers. And why not? We've already had the terms holistic and freewriting and prewriting and writing-across-the-curriculum and other such joining our professional lexicon. Time to move on.

As Bruffee points to in his article, collaborative learning takes issue with a number of teacher practices. For one thing, "Humanistic study, we have been led to believe, is a solitary life, and the vitality of the humanities lies in the talents and endeavors of each of us as individuals" (645). Our educational system has followed suit: a classroom is composed of individual efforts and abilities. It is a system we are more likely to recognize by its parts: student plus student plus student. Not something that lends itself readily to collabortive learning, especially given the evaluative nature of present classrooms. Consequently, buzz phrase or not, when we open a can of collaborative learning in our classrooms, we'd better know what we're cooking.

Yet, as valuable as insights and cautions are, as valuable as Bruffee's discussion of the theoretical nature of

collaborative learning and its implications, practice is another matter. Bruffee ". . . offers no recipes" (636). Reading his article will not arm us for the classroom on Monday morning. Yet at the same time, he suggests " . . . many teachers are unsure about how to use collaborative learning and about when and where, appropriately, it should be used" (636). What follows is a recipe, one that can be taken as is, or one that will, hopefully, be elaborated on, extended, made real and useful to the community you and your classroom are and are part of.

An apology, though. My title is a bit misleading. Much of what I discuss here is aimed at enhancing opportunities for collaborative learning rather than training students to generate annotated bibliographies. My emphasis, my hidden agenda, is directed at getting real products out of students engaged in classroom activities. Creating an annotated bibliography is but one step of the process, and an early one at that, to creating what I see as real learning, a learning that has value to the community beyond the classroom.

What It Is

Almost anyone with graduate school experience has learned to treasure annotated bibliographies. They are a fact of life for many of us. A means to cover a lot of territory in a hurry to get to the sources that we need. Without them, we have to rely on a title or a context. Yet, as Patrick Scott notes about composition, "On even a cursory count, there are now over two dozen journals regularly publishing material in the field, not to

mention books, course texts, research reports, or ERIC documents" (167). An enormous wealth of current information which does not even take into account previous publications. And composition is a relatively small field compared to other disciplines. John Naisbett indicates that "Between 6,000 and 7,000 scientific articles are written each day" with increases leading to an estimate that "By 1985 the volume of information will be somewhere between four and seven times what it was only a few years earlier" (25). With 1985 behind us, Naisbett has not yet verified his estimate, but we can assume that we are still dealing with incredible numbers. Furthermore, as Edward Corbett suggests, "Nothing--not even last year's hemline--dates as quickly as a published bibliography" (79).

But, we are expected to know. We are expected to be current on events happening in the world, current in our professional literature. And if we write, especially research, or are graduate students, or are in front of a classroom, we are seemingly expected to know it all. Regardless of the quantity of material. The "Information Age" requires our participation in its resources, both as producers and consumers. As educators, we are in part responsible for it and to it. Additionally, we are responsible for insuring that our students become aware consumers and producers.

Producing an annotated bibliography is one way of doing so. An annotation is simply a short comment describing a document. usually indicating the scope and specific focus of a work. Collected, they become a document. En masse, usually gathered

around a topic, annotations become powerful databases. Easily said, especially to teachers and graduate students and researchers--people who regularly encounter annotated bibliographies, and who have need of them. They are tools, instruments to be used when there is need to use them. That is the end they are designed for. But they are also a means to promote learning, both of which are easily adaptable to almost any classroom, but more on that later.

Perhaps, the easiest way to describe annotations is to look at a couple of examples. But first some context about these particular examples. They are taken from an annotated bibliography which was prepared by a group of graduate students in Duane Roen's English 597r, Writing Across the Curriculum, during the Spring 1986 semester at the University of Arizona. The course had come about because of a specific need by a committee overseeing writing across the curriculum efforts at the University. There was a problem: no one knew what was going on with the more than 200 designated writing emphasis courses scattered throughout the University curriculum in the more than 80 departments. Our mission was to survey and describe a representative sample of these courses. Divide to conquer became a sort of unspoken rule. Faced with the enormity of our task, (we ended up with a 1610 page report, see Brown) we each selected particular areas of the University to focus our individual attention. For example, one of us investigated the Oriental Studies Department, another took the College of Engineering and Mines, I took the College of Business and Public Administration,

somebody else went to the Journalism Department, and so on.

But we needed to know what was going on in writing across the curriculum outside of our particular community. We needed to know the state of the art, both in our field of composition and in the disciplines we were investigating. To be effective investigators and reporters, and to have a background for our efforts, and to place our efforts in a context, we had to survey the available literature. Furthermore, we could not let our background search hamper our primary purpose. We had limited resources and specific time constraints (i.e. a deadline and busy individual schedules). Again, divide to conquer became the rule. Each of us was given a requirement: over the course of the semester provide at least 10 annotations on material relevant to the project and/or of particular relevance to our individual topic areas (Roen). The result was an annotated bibliography of well over 100 entries (Mittan and Colavito).

However, of more immediate interest here is what occurred, the dynamic of the event so to speak. Cooperation and collaboration were integral to the overall project. The process of researching our topic and its various subsets heightened our sense of being a team, of collaborating. We all had individual responsibilities, but an essential component was that each of us was aware of what the others were doing. As such we became twelve pairs of eyes instead of just one plowing through the three million plus documents the University of Arizona Library is reputed to have. A great deal of exchange went on. Someone would run across an article in a discipline and pass it to the

appropriate investigator during the next class session, or in the halls, or leave it at the departmental mailbox. We poked and prodded and wallowed in the topic, and we shared its wealth. Admittedly we had some duplication of effort and of annotations. Surprisingly, this was not much of a problem. There was simply so much material that probability was on our side. And our individual specialties kept duplication reduced as well.

But how did we go about presenting our annotations? During a few minutes of one class meeting, we discussed the requirements of an annotation. For consistency and usefulness, we decided on three criteria. First, we would cite our sources using Modern Languages Association (MLA) style (Gibaldi and Achert). Second, we would identify the audience for the material. And finally, we would note the focus or purpose of the material. We specified that each annotation should be kept under 100 words. To assist this economy, we determined that 5 x 8 index cards would be sufficient. They would be easier to handle as well. An additional consideration was that the cards would lend themselves to alphabetizing when it came time to assemble them as a whole bibliography.

I will grant that we were graduate students. If not already familiar with annotations, responsible enough to teach ourselves about them. However, their simplicity, especially given the criteria we established early on, requires little actual instruction. Perhaps, the easiest and most effective means of instruction is imitation. See what they are and you see what needs to be presented. The trick is actually taking a complete

work and distilling its essence into fewer than 100 words. Doing so, however, emphasizes a number of text features that are currently seen as important to learning, especially literacy skills.

Try it yourself. Take the following example and analyze it briefly. Note what features you see that will possibly aid student learning.

An Example of a Book Annotation

> Gere, Anne Ruggles, ed. Roots in the Sawdust: Writing to Learn Across the Disciplines. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1985.
>
> Audience: Aimed primarily at secondary education teachers, this collection also has applications for teachers in any content area at any grade level.
>
> Focusing on getting secondary education teachers to use writing to teach thinking skills through writing, this collection of fifteen separately authored articles offers a variety of classroom strategies adaptable to almost any content area. The first nine chapters focus on specific ways to include writing in content area classrooms, while the last six offer a more comprehensive view on writing to learn. A Glossary and Annotated Bibliography are included.

The following example points to several features of annotation which promote learning. Both examples can be used as models for student annotations as well.

An Example of a Article Annotation

> Raimes, Ann. "Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum: The Experience of a Faculty Seminar." College English 41 (1980): 797-801.

[Note MLA style--a feature which can be covered in most instances by a brief handout if students' texts do not. This feature is easily transferable to research papers, and becomes an important skill for students entering or already in university settings.]

> Audience: Specifically addressed to writing instructors but of interest to faculty and administrators in other disciplines, especially at the postsecondary level.

[Note that attention to audience is useful to the user of the bibliography, but the producer learns as well. By determining the audience of the work, the student is paying attention to an important text feature, especially in light of student's own awareness of audience in his or her own writing.]

> [1] Noting the difficulty of interesting faculty from other disciplines in teaching writing, the author

> reports on her experiences in developing and leading a faculty seminar at a large urban college. [2] She discusses the format of the seminar and a number of concerns and questions raised by participants. [3] Stressing that students' writing to learn is more important to content area teachers than teaching writing, she recommends that " . . . to improve writing was not to teach it in all courses but to do it in all courses . . ." (799). [4] Finally, she points to how contact with writing in other content areas is affecting her teaching of writing.

[Note that the first sentence describes the overall content of the article and provides a context. The second sentence elaborates. The third sentence points at the article's focus. The last sentence further describes the article, but also suggests its possible value to the audience. Quoting the author is not usually done in an annotation, and is probably not necessary here which may account for the annotation being 101 words.]

While the above addresses specific features of learning through annotating, more general levels of skill are involved as well. For one thing, the connection between reading and writing is obvious. The two skills become so interrelated as to be indistinguishable. Furthermore, annotation encourages direct interaction with the text. Students read for detail, but more importantly, they read for an overall sense of the text's purpose

and how it satisfies that purpose. They become active learners in the sense of Frank Smith who suggests that there is ". . . this continual process of . . . 'making sense of the world'" (1). They become active writers in the sense of Donald Murray who notes that ". . . the writer is engaged in a continual struggle to discover what he has to say and how to say it" (21).

In addition to reading and writing, students engage in a whole language experience in the sense of Kenneth Goodman who stresses that "All human societies are linguisitc. They have one or more languages that they use to communicate needs, wishes, concepts, emotions, exeriences to each other. Humans use language, not only to communicate, but as a medium of thought and learning" (71). Conversation and listening come into play because of the need to exchange sources, share strategies. Research skills come into play. Synthesis and analysis take place. Evaluation and selectivity occurs. Precise use of language is honed. Most likely, students become more familiar with text structures and strategies. This list could go on. And admittedly, how much learning takes place, and its exact nature, needs to be investigated more empirically.

Yet, as an activity suitable for engaging students, annotated bibliographies show promise. They can strip away the "this doesn't really matter to anybody but the teacher" because because they easily can matter. Students can produce the real and in doing so learn. Numerous annotated bibliographies do exist in the world outside of the classroom. They have purpose. They are used. They are more than exercise.

What To Do (Variations on a Theme)

An essential feature of an annotated bibliography is its usefulness. Yet, as I pointed to earlier, it is a means as well as an end, a means not necessarily just as a learning activity, but one of value to a community outside the classroom. As Harvey Wiener notes "The success of the collaborative model depends primarily upon the quality of the initial task the students must perform in groups" (54). I suggest the success of an annotated bibliography and student participation in it relies on putting it to use. The bibliography is a record in itself, but is best produced in support of a project. As such, annotation has a real function, as it did for our investigation at the University. Duane Roen's course got us out of the classroom. It allowed us to contribute to our profession and to our community, the University.

My sense is that with a little initial effort, those contributions can come from almost any grade level. Furthermore, these contributions lend themselves naturally to collaboration. Already we've seen collaborative efforts produce anthologies of children's literature by children. Shirley Brice Heath used people, including students from a variety of grade levels, throughout two communities to gather ethnographic material on language differences. The Foxfire series of folklore and craft was ". . . collected and put together almost entirely by high school students" (Wigginton 9). Annotating a bibliography of such efforts could easily be a worthwhile project itself.

What matters is the guiding intention. If there is a need,

then there is a guiding purpose. Schools and communities around those schools are filled with need. In an age of scarce resources, many of these needs go unmet. And classrooms are filled with students who see little value to the skills they practice. Such a waste, when environmental, educational and social issues molder on priority lists or wait for expensive task forces or politicians on "fact-finding" tours.

Perhaps, I am too idealistic. Perhaps, the logistics and prevailing attitudes among students, teachers, administrators, and parents preclude the idea that students themselves are resources, potential contributors. Yet, if we are to take collaborative learning seriously, we must find a context for it. As Bruffee notes, collaborative learning ". . . provides a particular kind of social context for conversation, a particular kind of community of status equals: peers . . . in a community that approximates the one most students must eventually write for in everyday life, in business, government, and the professions" (642). And at the same time, we would be fulfilling our responsibilities to these students. We would be providing learning opportunities, events creating experiences no educational exercise can deliver, wrack our brains as we might. And finally, blasphemy of blasphemies, ". . . collaboration advances best when groups are left pretty much to the students themselves . . . the best teacher is usually the seemingly most idle teacher . . . "(Wiener 58).

Not easy, any of this.

> But if we accept the premise that knowledge is an artifact created by a community of knowledgeable peers constituted by the language of that community, and that learning is a social and not and individual process, then to learn is not to assimilate information and improve our mental eyesight. To learn is to work collaboratively to establish and maintain knowledge among a community of knowledgeable peers . . . . We socially justify belief when we explain to others why one way of understanding how the world hangs together seems to us preferable to other ways of understanding it. (Bruffee 646).

Doing so, seems to me, is what we as teachers, are all about.

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